The Visual Turn: Affect, Autobiography, History, and the Graphic Narrative

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The Visual Turn: Affect, Autobiography, History, and the Graphic Narrative

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This paper deals with a new medium of narrating history: the graphic narrative. Using Art Spiegelman's cult text, Maus, *Marjane Satrapi's* Persepolis, *and Joe Sacco's* Safe Area Gora•de *and* Palestine, *it studies the strategies through which the graphic narrative delivers historical trauma, such as genocide, war, and oppression, in what it calls a 'hypervisible history.' It proposes that the graphic narrative is a constituent of the visual culture of affect that helps render visible what has been censored or hidden. It combines official history with the personal autobiographical mode and subverts the primacy and authority of the former. Finally, through a strategy of self-portraiture and hypostasis, the graphic narrative, as subjective documentary, generates a 'graphic history.' The essay argues a case for the graphic narrative as a medium for the transmission of inexpressible trauma.*

The comic strip gave readers of the newspaper something to laugh about everyday from the 19th century.[1] The comic book from the 1930s expanded the medium and gave readers, over a period of time, Asterix, Tintin, the Superhero (Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man), and war tales. In the late 1980s and 1990s, several serialized comics were re-published in book form and led to the rise of what has been called the 'graphic novel,' of which the most famous was arguably Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), to which Miller added the less successful *Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (serialized in 2001-02, and published in book form in 2002).

The term 'graphic novel' refers simply to a novel in graphic form (Roger Sabin, cited in Coughlan, 2006, p. 851). It is also variously termed as 'graphic narrative,' 'sequential art,' and more often as 'comic books' (Wolk, 2007, p. 61), though I argue that the graphic novel is only a subset of the graphic narrative medium. It must be underscored right away that the graphic narrative is a 'medium,' within which we have 'genres' like graphic fiction, graphic reportage and graphic memoirs.

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[1] For studies of comics as a medium, *see* Baker (1989), Inge (1990), and Savage (1990), among others.

I prefer the term 'graphic narrative' for this essay because I am not dealing with fictional/imaginative writing at all, but memoirs, historical accounts, and reportage. In the memoir genre, Art Spiegelman's (1986 and 1991) *Maus*, a memoir of Spiegelman's Auschwitz survivor-father, won a special Pulitzer. In this essay, I explore some key features of the graphic narrative, both the fictional and non-fictional genres, while trying to account for its sudden popularity. For my purposes, I use the two Spiegelman works mentioned above, Satrapi Marjane's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003, hereafter *Persepolis I*) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004, hereafter *Persepolis II*),[2] Sacco Joe's *Safe Area Goražde* (first serialized in 2000, and published as a book in 2007, hereafter *Goražde*) and *Palestine* (2003).

My thesis is: contemporary history is not only visualized but made hypervisible through the use of a 'common' and everyday medium like the comic book in the graphic narrative. The graphic narrative presents what I call the 'visual turn' in recording, in particular, historical horrors like genocide, ethnocide, war, and collective trauma to provide a 'hypervisible history.' By 'hypervisible' I mean an 'augmented visibility,' beyond that of CNN or BBC newscasts, official histories, or documentation. I see hypervisibility as a feature of the democratization of historical trauma in terms of its availability, accessibility, and format. The graphic narrative format, I suggest, makes historical trauma available in a common format—a format we recognize easily from the comic strips in the daily newspaper. In a departure from the monotonous or hysterical accounts on newscasts or scholarly work, the graphic narrative makes traumas available in a quotidian form.

This 'hypervisible history,' I argue, is made possible through: (1) a visual culture of affect; (2) a combination of official history and autobiography through the incorporation of documented history along with the visual self-portraiture of the horrified witness-narrator; and (3) a strategy of hypostasis when depicting trauma. Hypervisible histories of horror, I argue, are made possible by the key features of the graphic narrative itself. In what follows, I suggest three key features and modes of reading the graphic narrative, specifically the graphic memoir.

The Visual Culture of Affect

I begin with a speculation: the rise and popularity of the graphic narrative as a logical step in the 'visualizing' of everyday culture. Mirzoeff (1998) argues that the modern age is characterized by its visualizing tendencies. Mirzoeff writes, "[O]ne of the most striking features of the new visual culture is the visualization of things that are not in themselves visual" (p. 6). Visual cultures like photography, he suggests, became means of defining reality itself (p. 7).

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[2] *Persepolis* was the winner of the 2004 ALA Alex Award, Booklist Editor's Choice for Young Adults, the New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age, and the School Library Journal Adult Books for Young Adults. According to Malek, over half a million copies of *Persepolis* have sold worldwide (Malek, 2006, p. 366).

I propose that the graphic narratives of Sacco, Spiegelman, and Satrapi must be read as a visual medium that also happens to use words (but where words or the verbal text supplements the visual one) and an image-text that makes history and historical events, such as the Holocaust, real and accessible, and something more besides.

These graphic narratives are situated within a visual culture of affect where the graphic instills horror and revulsion. If graphic narratives give us traumatic history, as the essay argues later, then the very impact of the visual evokes a particular kind of response. While it is a tautology to say that Holocaust narratives (such as the writings of Elie Wiesel or Primo Levi) are all horrific, the graphic narratives take the affective context a degree higher. If, as Mirzoeff (1998) proposes, the visual is not simply a medium of information but offers us a 'sensual immediacy that cannot be rivaled by the print media' (p. 9), then the graphic narrative offers us a visual immediacy of horror.

However, it must be emphasized that a re-telling (which is what Sacco, Spiegelman, and to some extent Satrapi do) is just that: a re-telling. While Spiegelman and Sacco did not experience the events they (re)tell, Satrapi relies on other sources—her parents, grandmother, uncle, and friends of her family (*Persepolis I*, p. 43)—to tell us Iranian history. Would such a re-telling be authentic? Would re-telling be on a par with documentary history? In a thoughtful essay on *Maus*, Huyssen Andreas (2000) argues that Spiegelman "accepts that the past is visually inaccessible through realistic representation: whatever strategy he might choose, it is bound to be inauthentic." What Spiegelman does, according to Huyssen, is not 'documentary authenticity of representation...but *authentication*.' He achieves a 'new and unique form of authentication and effect,' argues Huyssen, through a 'complex layering of historical facts, their oral re-telling and their transformation into image-text' (pp. 76-77, emphasis in original). Building on Huyssen, I suggest that the graphic narrative achieves not authenticity but an 'affective authentication' when the re-telling of horrific scenes and experiences are delivered as image-text.

The graphic narrative offers visuals of people crying, being shocked, and afraid in situations of great stress and extreme danger. I argue that such a visual representation does away with the need for description by showing the 'characters' being affected. This ties in with the very context of trauma that the characters experience. If trauma is the context which wipes out language and speech, then the graphic narrative builds on precisely this condition: traumatic situations can only be represented as the absence of speech. The graphic narrative works to show extreme affect minus any speech, and thus, constitutes a new rhetorical strategy in itself, a strategy that gestures at both—the act of representation (visual narrative) and the context that has to be represented (war, horror). The language of affect in the graphic narrative thus reflects and captures a condition when

language itself fails, and where the horror is primarily visual (though Spiegelman does cite his father's 'words' of sorrow and anger).

I propose that the graphic narrative is aligned with the visual cultures of affect that circulate around, inform, and immerse us. There are two key aspects of this visual culture of affect that frames the production and consumption of the graphic narratives of Spiegelman, Sacco, and Satrapi. First, the visual culture of affect helps generate a visual history of trauma. In an age of what has been presciently categorized as 'compassion fatigue' (Moeller, 1999), the only way horrific events of genocide or torture even begin to register upon our minds and grip our imagination is when they are presented as 'visual' materials. Psychoanalysts of trauma, such as Dori Laub (himself a Holocaust survivor), have argued that the 'art of trauma' may be the only effective means of representing trauma (Laub and Podell, 1995). The graphic narrative is precisely this 'art of trauma' in a visual culture of affect.

The images of viewers staring in open-mouthed, wide-eyed horror at the collapse of the World Trade Center have circulated on our screens for some years now. Likewise, the shocked expressions of the people after the Mumbai siege (26/11), images from Afghanistan and Iraq, and the visuals of Rwanda's refugees or those at the refugee camps of Sudan are frequently aired on our screens. The graphic narrative, I argue, fits into this visual culture of affect where horror flits across our screen and sightline almost everyday. However— and this is the significant contribution of the medium—unlike 'screen' horrors/ traumas which are ephemeral, the graphic narrative is more 'permanent.'

Second, the visual culture of affect brings to the surface what remains hidden. Mirzoeff Nicholas (2006) has argued that the clips of the Abu Ghraib tortures were 'invisible' because they were not 'meant' to be seen or telecast. The same could be said of Saddam Hussain's execution, filmed on mobile phone cameras and printed the subsequent days. In this same visual culture that works with the 'invisible,' the graphic narrative reveals the prisons of Iran (Satrapi), the concentration camps (Spiegelman), occupied Palestine (Sacco), and the devastated war zones of Bosnia (Sacco). This visual culture of affect is also one that we see on websites like 'Witness' (www.witness.org) which document cases of human rights violations round the world. 'Witness' asks its viewers to film any such violation and upload it, thus creating a visual archive of such atrocities.

The graphic narrative fits into this visual culture of horror and affect. It reveals what is not-meant-to-be-seen: it renders the 'invisible' visible. The visualization of the invisible in this culture produces a shock-affect: the reader is presented with visuals of scenes and events that s/he does not know happened except vaguely. The graphic novel goes a long way in bringing to our consciousness the conditions and locations of horror from around the world.

I would go further and propose that what the graphic narrative does is to shift historical trauma from being invisible to hypervisible. When the graphic narrative represents extreme trauma in a form that is mainstream and popular, we get a 'hypervisible history.' In sharp contrast to weighty academic or popular histories and documentary evidence of these horrors (which few people read), the quotidian graphic novel renders them commonplace. The choice of medium to make invisible history available is the key move in Spiegelman, Sacco, and Satrapi.

Doherty (1996), writing about *Maus*, notes: "[B]y its very nature, it [the comic book format] *seems* ill-equipped for the moral seriousness and tonal restraint that have been demanded of Holocaust art" (p. 71, emphasis added). Yet this medium, continues Doherty, possesses a 'graphic quality well-suited to a confrontation with Nazism and the Holocaust' (p. 71). Orvell (1992), in an early essay, argues that *Maus* embodies 'a seriousness of purpose that goes against the essential lightness of the cartoon mode' (p. 111). What I am terming 'hypervisible history' is the serious transmission of extreme historical trauma from under the weight of censorship, official documentation, and unverifiable sources to the public gaze through an apparently frivolous and 'comic' medium.[3]

I see the graphic narrative's 'hypervisible history' as contributing to a democratization of trauma transmission by making horrific events accessible. Joe Sacco comes close to this formulation when in *Palestine* he wishes to know how Abu Akram was tortured. Abu Akram then shows him how he was beaten: he pushes Sacco back in his chair and brings down his fist, but stops short of a shocked Sacco. The visual depicts Sacco mouth gaping, perspiring, and screaming, even though he has not really been beaten. Sacco's verbal text reads:

> I get the point...Vicarious experiences are one thing but—I want itsy-bitsy details of the crunching sounds... 'cause I was raised a suburban schoolboy...horror was at the movies (*Palestine*, pp. 93-94).

Sacco conveys some sense of the torture by showing his own subjective experience that was, despite his fears, only close to the actual. It is this nearness to—virtual, as opposed to real—being beaten that makes him understand.

It is my contention that the graphic narrative is not just suitable, it is perhaps the only medium left wherein the true expanse of horror can be captured. This 'capture' is what I term 'hypervisible history,' where the buried, the concealed/secreted, and the censored trauma are laid bare before our eyes through the everyday medium. This 'hypervisible history' is not, however, generated simply as a documentation or chronological narrative. The graphic novel, more often than not, takes recourse to an autobiographical mode with intrusive, subjective narrators to tell us about historical trauma.

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[3] Remnants of the comic medium do, however, survive in these memoirs: Spiegelman's black comedy about his father's irritating eccentricities, Satrapi's self-deprecatory humor, and Sacco's perpetually bemused expression.

History as/and Autobiography

If history is traditionally an objective, reliable account of incidents based on particular forms of narrative, then how do we see 'history' in the confessional, autobiographical memoirs of Sacco, Spiegelman, and Satrapi, which are by definition subjective and limited? Spiegelman, Sacco, and Satrapi work at the interface of documented history and memoir, between the subjective perception of the trauma by the narrator and the documentary official culture. Neither official history nor memoir is privileged as a genre, and both work together to convey a better sense of the events.

Every graphic narrative dealing with historical trauma makes use of other documentary evidence. Spiegelman's Vladek mourns the members of his dead family: 'all what is left, it's the photos' (*Maus II*, p. 115). *Maus II* carries the photograph of Spiegelman's dead brother Richieu even before the text starts. Both *Maus I* and *II* have maps on the back cover. There are plans of the crematoria and the gas chambers (*Maus II*, p. 70).

In the opening pages of *Maus I*, we can see the most palpable sign of the Holocaust: the number tattooed on the Jewish arm, with Vladek's 175113 clearly visible to us (*Maus I*, p. 12). This is one more piece of documentation of the past that the visual narrative invites us to notice. Satrapi offers us the official history of Iran, citing from actual documents and speeches: 'After a long sleep of 2,500 years, the revolution has finally awakened the people' (*Persepolis I*, p. 11). Her father takes photographs of the unrest in the streets, the demonstrations, and the sloganeering people (*Persepolis I*, p. 29). TV broadcasts, official reportage and declarations constitute the official version of history in Satrapi (*Persepolis I*, pp. 40, 55, 73 and 114; *II*, p. 142). Sacco provides a history of Yugoslavia's formation, its ethnic demographics and maps (*Goražde*, pp. 19-20 and 38). The progress of the war is also given to us in the form of maps (p. 86). Such an 'official memory culture' (the term is Huyssen's, p. 81) is never left to speak for itself, but is merged with the deeply subjective in all graphic narratives.

In a small, easily-overlooked panel in *Maus II*, Spiegelman draws attention to this subversion of 'official memory culture' by the subjective and the personal. Spiegelman tells his father that he has been reading about the orchestra at Auschwitz. To this Vladek responds: 'An orchestra?...No, I remember only marching, not any orchestras.' Spiegelman as Artie persists: 'I dunno, but it's very well documented.' And Vladek is equally firm in his denial: 'No. At the gate I heard only guards shouting' (*Maus II*, p. 54). Here, Vladek insists that his memory of the horror of Auschwitz does not include anything as pleasurable as the orchestra. Despite Spiegelman's assertion that it is 'documented'—by which he surely means documented official histories—Vladek refuses. Here official histories are rejected out of hand by subjective memories of the same, and it is this subversion that leads me to the next notable feature of the graphic narrative's attempt at 'hypervisible history.'

Historical events like the Holocaust, the genocide in Sarajevo, or the revolution in Iran can only be mediated for us through subjective and personal accounts. Malek (2006) explicitly identifies Satrapi's work as catering to a Western audience—thereby serving the purpose of 'history'—and also as facilitating a better understanding of their history to second-generation Iranians. The 'subjective' is, of course, the autobiographical-memoir component of the graphic narrative. If Miller (2001) is to be believed, the memoir is the 'most important narrative mode of our contemporary culture' (p. 421), and its role in the 'hypervisible history' of the graphic narrative is worth studying.

The memoir-form, subjective narration, and visualization deny primacy (or maybe even authenticity) to the 'official memory culture' (the term is Huyssen's, p. 81). It gives otherwise-silent speakers and victims the space to articulate. In the graphic narrative, the subjective memoir form is presented mainly as visuals of bodily gestures and facial expressions. In a reading of Satrapi, Worth (2007) has argued that *Persepolis* is an 'embodied performance' where repeated self-portraiture, the corporeal, and the visible result in a middle ground between fiction and theatre.

'Embodied performance' is a useful concept because it captures the highly dramatic—and often melodramatic—visualizations of the graphic narrative, where the narrator's expressions and body language are an integral part of her/his re-telling of history. When Sacco draws himself with horror-struck expression at the reports and sights of Palestine or Sarajevo, or when Satrapi weeps at the death of a relative (p. 70), we see a subjective experience of the event mediating the historical event and official memory. The maps of Spiegelman and Sacco and the official documentation of Iran in Satrapi, I suggest, only make sense when read in conjunction with the subjective self-portraiture.

Joe Sacco photographs Israeli soldiers beating up protesting Palestinians (*Palestine*, pp. 56-57). Later he sees 'hooded uniformed men walking in the open like they own[ed] the place' (*Palestine*, p. 163). Some sense of the horror of present history registers through Sacco's own expressive visualization of it. Reporting the genocide in Bosnia, Sacco provides visual images of his respondents and informers crying, anxious and afraid (p. 159). The wasted, empty faces in the streets of Gorazde (*Goražde*, p. 17), the horror of discovering the bodies of their family members and friends (*Goražde*, pp. 90 and 92-93), the hopelessness on the faces of evacuated/evicted Serbs and raped women (*Goražde*, pp. 95, 117, 156, 159 and 202), and the pockmarked buildings (*Goražde*, pp. 132 and 156) that Sacco sees become his documentation of the historical event.[4]

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[4] It is significant that all reported events—where witnesses tell their stories of genocide and massacres to Sacco—in Sacco's *Goražde* are set within thick black borders almost as though to encase them separately, and suggestive of mourning or obituary columns.

Iran's tyrannical regime becomes 'visible' to Satrapi when her favorite uncle Anoosh dies. The young Satrapi goes to visit Anoosh in prison. He gives her a bread swan. Then the next visual shows a headline: 'Russian spy executed.' The following one shows child Satrapi crying (*Persepolis I*, pp. 69-70). When she admits to sleeping with her boyfriend, Satrapi captures the context of her 'act' by showing the shocked expressions on the faces of her classmates (*Persepolis II*, p. 149). In a particularly gripping visual-verbal segment, Satrapi speaks about how after the Islamic revolution, the street names changed and everybody followed the strict restrictions on dress and behavior. The text reads: 'I felt as though I was walking through a cemetery.' The visual shows a woman in silhouette on a road framed exactly between buildings. Under her feet, buried under the road are dozens of skulls (*Persepolis II*, p. 97). This highly imaginative perception of what social life and norms had become in the tyrannical country also becomes a historical narrative. Here the actual events and the child's (or woman's) perception of it are conveyed in the same visual sequence, thus merging the objective-historical with the subjective-personal.

The graphic narrative about historical horror, I argue, is a narrative of witnessing where witnessing is indicated through the narrator's horrified, shocked, saddened, or angry facial expressions and body language. Historical trauma is performed through the body of Sacco and Satrapi, and this performance, I propose, is made possible only because of the visual possibilities of the graphic narrative. In other words, the horrors of history are delivered to us through not only the official documentation but also through visual self-portraits of the horrified narrator.

In *Maus*, Spiegelman is the narrator-artist, Artie, who articulates the story of his survivor-father.[5] Vladek's tale comes to us through the interlocutor Artie. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi is the autobiographical, first-person narrator of the events in Iran. In *Goražde* and *Palestine*, Sacco is the eyewitness and interlocutor to the events. In each of these three—and this is the key point—the narrator is physically present in the frames (panels) of the tale. In the case of Spiegelman, as Emily Budick has argued (p. 380), the work 'does away with the pretense of historian's distance and objectivity' by showing it to be a personal account ('*my father* bleeds history,' as the subtitle tells us). The graphic narrative, I argue, following Victoria Elmwood, is one where eyewitness accounts and documented history come together in the same space, and thereby, reveal the 'shortcomings and strengths of each, particularly in the context of historical traumas' (Elmwood, 2004, p. 692). Such a complicated mix is radically underscored in a brilliant move by Spiegelman in *Maus II*. Narrating the story

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[5] Spiegelman has himself stated that *Maus* is also an autobiographical account of his relationship with his survivor-father, James Young (1998) has suggested that *Maus* is 'not so much about the Holocaust as about the survivor's tale itself and the artist-son's recovery from it' (p. 670).

of his mother Anja, also at Auschwitz, Vladek describes how he smuggled food packets across to her, and one day the supervisor of the women's camp sees Anja. Anja hides. and the visual and verbal texts show her thwarted supervisor seeking Anja to punish her. The supervisor threatens the prisoners to reveal the name of the guilty party. Then Spiegelman writes: 'But *mother* didn't step out' (*Maus II*, p. 66, emphasis added). Here the narrative has swiftly moved from Vladek ('I saw her...,' 'Only a friend of Anja's...,' p. 65) to Spiegelman himself ('Mother...,' p. 66). In each case, the self-portrait visuals combine with official histories to provide us with the 'hypervisible history' of war or collective trauma.

Finally, I situate the graphic narrative's hypervisible histories made available through self-portraits in the context of contemporary discourses where the personal narrative is of paramount social importance. Ignatieff (2001) and Schaffer and Smith (2004) have convincingly argued that human rights discourses (juridical, legal, and social) are initiated when the victim speaks. In other words, personal stories become the sites of larger discourses, legal action, and social movements. The personal and the autobiographical cannot, in short, be dismissed as being merely subjective because the subjective can serve as the mediator of larger social contexts. This same argument can serve us usefully in reading the graphic narrative.

Graphic Histories

It is significant that the most popular genre within the graphic narrative medium is memoir-reportage: that of Spiegelman, Satrapi, and Sacco. Therefore, the question is: Does the form of the graphic narrative help a particular mode of history-writing?

Traditional comics criticism tells that the reader combines the words with the visuals (panels) and fills the gaps (gutter) between the panels (Saraceni, 2003). Levine (2002) has argued that "history becomes legible in the narrative tissue of *Maus*, it does so by bleeding through those very gaps and gutters that define the 'comix' medium" (p. 320). I want to extend this line of thinking and propose that the graphic narrative is particularly well-suited to certain histories: atrocity, genocide, war, and catastrophe. This is so because the very nature of representation—the visual—enables the delivery of high-intensity images of trauma, pain, and terror. In other words, I am proposing that the form of the graphic narrative, mixing the word and the image, provides the appropriate language of representing the horrors of war or genocide.

As McGlothlin (2003) has argued, the verbal text of Vladek is superimposed upon the visual representation of the past (p. 179). In *Maus*, it is almost as though: (1) the verbal Vladek text is a commentary on the visual narrative of the past; and/or (2) the visual embodies and vivifies the verbal narration. This collaboration of image and text, and therefore of past and present, is the

power of graphic narrative. One cannot read the verbal text without the visual representation, and the verbal lends the visual the narrative explanation/explication. This is the key form of the graphic narrative and its 'theme' of history.

The graphic memoir of Spiegelman and Satrapi, and the graphic reportage of Sacco constitute what I shall call 'graphic history.' The term 'graphic,' as it is commonly used, also signals the realism of the representation—graphic horror, graphic violence, graphic sex, etc. And this seems most appropriate for the subject matter of Sacco, Spiegelman, and Satrapi. The graphic narrative, I suggest, works with hypostasis as a mode of representation.

Hypostasis is a rhetorical figure where abstract concepts are embodied in human figures. Marc Singer, reading Michael Chabon's graphic novels, argues that the comic book hypostasizes concepts, and thereby, transcends the symbolic (Singer, 2008). At one level, this appears to be true. However, I propose that the hypostasis in the case of horrific narratives, such as Spiegelman's or Sacco's hypostasis, is itself symbolic, for it is an attempt to give a body to something unspeakable. Hypostasis here works with what Rothberg (2002) has termed 'traumatic realism.' History in Spiegelman, Sacco, and Satrapi (or even the fictional representation of the contemporary in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*) is given a body through the representation of the trauma inflicted upon the body.

The self-portraiture of the narrator expressing horror or fear was an 'embodied performance' of witnessing and recording history: the narrator's body in the visuals functioned as our 'sign' of the trauma s/he witnessed. In a similar fashion, in hypostasis, where injured, dead, and mutilated bodies/buildings fill visuals, trauma is given a body. Thus, hypostasis is the embodiment of trauma in the form of these ruined corpses, buildings, and streets and becomes the logical accompaniment to the embodying of witnessing. Self-portraiture and hypostasis are dual strategies in the graphic narrative to convey the horror of witnessing in the person of the narrator and the horror of the victim in the person of the dead/injured.

I see hypostasis, where trauma is given a body, as a logical accompaniment to the self-portraiture of the horrified narrator. The 'hypervisible history' can be made available through a combination of the self-portraiture and hypostasis of tortured bodies, corpses, and ruins. Both, one notes, are possible only because the format of the graphic novel enables the visual.

In *Persepolis*, scenes of torture are graphically represented. The revolution in Iran is over, and friends of Satrapi's parents are visiting. Satrapi's mother tells her, "We've invited Laly's father and Mohsen. They both just left prison" (*Persepolis I*, p. 49). When the men arrive, they first recount their tortures. Then they describe what happened to a mutual friend, Ahmadi (one of those

who did not survive): he was whipped and branded with an iron. The visuals show the whipping and the flayed skin and the screaming man (p. 51). The next series of panels does something equally interesting. The young Satrapi, having just heard of the tortures, now observes the iron in her own house and thinks: "I never imagined that you could use that appliance for torture" (p. 51). Here, the visuals talk to each other: the flower-patterned ironing board is strangely connected to, indeed doubles up as, the marked back of the tortured man.

What is fascinating is that these sketches of torture are some of the few that are not bounded in a frame: there are no boxes and hence technically, there is no 'panel' for any of these, just a series of three sketches of the torture unbounded. It is almost as though the horror of these incidents of torture cannot be captured within frames and Satrapi is making a meta-narrative comment: torture spills over the boundaries of humanity, decency, and the body. One of the most powerful representations of trauma in the work, the sketches serve as a hypostasis for traumatic history.

In Sacco's *Palestine*, the narrative of torture and interrogation uses thick black borders for the panels (pp. 102-113). The man is blindfolded, his head covered in a sack cloth and kept tied up for hours on end. He describes his suffering and his pain. The entire sequence is a series of small panels, concluding with a large one where he is set free and is in the streets. The small panels capture the incarceration very well: the boxed-in environment, the solitude. In his *Gora•de*, there are panels depicting massacres (p. 21), bleeding bodies (pp. 84 and 115), and the sawing-off of limbs in make-shift hospitals (p. 123).

In *Maus*, representations of physical examination before the selection for the gas chambers (*Maus II*, p. 58), the depiction of emaciated bodies of the camp inmates (p. 58), and the meta-narrative visual of Spiegelman at his drawing board with a heap of dead bodies at his feet and buzzing flies hovering (p. 41) constitute its hypostasis. In all cases, there seems to be a meta-narrative comment about the very act of representing tortures: Satrapi's 'unbounded' visuals, Sacco's heavily blackened panel borders, and Spiegelman's self-portrait of working in the (virtual) presence of corpses of Jews. The meta-narrative here reflects on the artist's task of representation, even as it symbolically underscores the horrors of war.

Marianne Hirsch has argued that visual images do more than merely represent scenes and experiences of the past: they communicate a bodily experience by evoking our own bodily experience (Hirsch, 2002, p. 72). This is precisely what the graphic narrative does: it delivers to us history in all its shocking aspects. The subjective adds to rather than retracts from official history. When Satrapi draws young boys being killed in the war and immediately follows it up (on the same page) with a panel showing her partying uncaringly, she shocks us with her very personalized story-telling (*Persepolis I*, p. 102).

One final point regarding both self-portraiture of witnessing and the hypostasis of description-visualization: The conscious decision to bring in the self-portrait of the narrator-witness in Satrapi, Spiegelman, and Sacco undermines the reliability of the narration. By definition, a first-person narrative is restricted to what the narrator sees, hears, or experiences. The graphic narrative, while subverting the totalitarianism implicit in official history by focusing also on the subjective, undermines the subjective in turn. The graphic narrative emphatically proposes fragmentation—in perception (of the narrator alone), in body (all graphic narratives have body parts spread over/across panels), and epistemology. To put it differently, the graphic narratives' break up of the 'story' into panels, the body into bits, and the perception into a limited range of vision calls attention to the fragmentary nature of all knowledge. Once again, I am proposing a (postmodern) meta-narrative strategy in the graphic narrative where the fragmented self-portrait, body, and perception emphasize the partial nature of the history being told.

The graphic narrative's complicated mix of subjective narration and objective history, image and text, personal and collective when dealing with historical trauma causes it to function as a subjective documentary. I take 'documentary' to mean, in John Corner's words, 'radical interrogation and alternative perspective,' where the 'authorial position is not "official" nor does it claim journalistic warrant.' Most importantly, in this sense of 'documentary,' there is 'a level of formal experimentation' (Corner, 2002, p. 147). Sacco, Spiegelman, and Satrapi, all seek to document historical wrongs and oppressions, and they experiment with the 'form' of this documentary by rendering it (1) as subjective part-autobiography and (2) as a graphic narrative. It, thus, functions as something beyond the mere documentary and more on the lines of a dramatic documentary where subjective opinions and emotional states play a key role in the choice of language, discourse, and representational modes. The subjective does not take away the real; it enhances it by showing us how human beings react to it.

If, as has been argued, the task of the Holocaust historian is to represent the unrepresentable, the graphic narrative offers a form that can go some considerable way in showing us the extent of what is unrepresentable—the horrors of war. The hypostasis and 'traumatic realism' of the panels of the past (in Spiegelman and Satrapi) or the present (in Sacco) is the narration of a graphic history through the narration of the trauma of history.

Since this essay began with a speculation, I would like to end with one. The graphic narrative of contemporary trauma is aligned with a new purpose of visual culture. This visual culture of reality TV, documentaries, websites such as 'Witness,' and blogging with the aid of flickr constitutes a new affective geography of the world, where the task of consciousness-raising about history,

trauma, or the other (the Holocaust Jews, the Bosnian refugees, the genocide victims in Rwanda, and the oppressed women in Iran) rests with the new media and forms. In this, I am proposing that, with all its limitations, the graphic narrative is a 'reality genre' that reveals a horrific reality beyond official histories. The historical imperative of the graphic narrative converges with the subjective-emotive element to generate the enormous power of these texts.

This essay has argued that the graphic memoir might be one of the key modes of depicting the intensity and extent of atrocity and violation around the world. The graphic narrative, or more specifically the graphic memoir, generates, the essay demonstrated, an intense 'graphic history.' This graphic history is made possible through (1) a visual culture of affect; (2) a combination of official history with subjective autobiography, where the latter takes the form of an 'embodied performance'—the visual self-portraiture of the horrified witness-narrator; and (3) an accompanying strategy of hypostasis when depicting trauma. An everyday medium such as the graphic narrative becomes the vehicle for the transmission of inexpressible trauma. In an age when horrors happen almost everyday, everywhere, and are suppressed, the graphic narrative not only visualizes it, but also forces us to pay attention with the hypervisible medium. ✳

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